

American Populism  
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Populism refers to a range of political stances that emphasize the idea of "the people" and often juxtapose this group against "the elite" or "the establishment."---Wikipedia. This defines the alienation of "ordinary" people who feel neglected and scorned by the educated "elites" who rule them.

People who feel displaced (jobs and industries lost), resent their government. But even college educated people who find that their educations are not producing careers for them feel alienated. Without programs to reconnect these people to a hopeful future, societies are in danger.

Populism needs a leader. It is not like a cooperative movement in which many people step forward to do what is needed, such as poll workers or heroic helpers after a catastrophe. Most of American society depends on this helper group, a practice from the beginning of our republic.

When I was a college professor, our country was in the midst of disillusionment over the war in Vietnam. Half-educated university students responded to the motto of "power to the people." But the question should be asked: which people? My father sourly noted that when you hear "power to the people," check to see if your pocket has been picked.

Populism is a global disease, not one exclusive to the United States. It goes back to the Middle Ages, when plagues and the Crusades moved peasants to desert their fields (a criminal act at the time) and set forth to fight "the people's war" in the Holy Land. One of the earliest populist leaders was a monk who led a pre-crusade down the Rhine River to kill Jews, throwing the bodies into the wells. His accusation was that the Jews caused the Black Death and drank Christian children's blood.

Other Crusade leaders led the mobs through Hungary on their way to the Holy Land and because Hungarians didn't speak a Latin-based language, the mob assumed they were Muslim and began to slaughter them. Ignorance and populism are a deadly combination.

America's first experience with populism came early in the 19th century when people alienated by their educated founding fathers found "people power" in the "great awakening," a frenzied bout of fundamentalist religion. But it gave rise to a group of "muscular" Christians, who would periodically revolt against educated leaders. This provided the United States with an always ready underclass to rebel against education, medicine, technology, and social change. These movements never really rose to power in our electoral system, fortunately.

Modern populism is a global movement of people who feel that their elected leaders don't care about them. When major industries become obsolete (coal and assembly line manufacturing), displaced workers face loss of dignity and become angry. Their communities begin to hollow out, with businesses closing, young people moving away, health services tied to employment ended, and educational opportunities that produce entrepreneurship no longer there.

The most useful understanding of this situation is that offered by Fiona Hill, in her book "There is Nothing for you Here," in which she compares three major societies threatened by populism: the former coal and manufacturing sectors of England, the same in the coal and "fly-over" Midwest, and Russia, after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Russia now has a new "president for life," Putin.

All three societies were faced by the same dilemma: what to do for the people left desperate by their plight. All three societies teetered on the edge of cynical leaders who tried to rise to power by manipulating the left-behind people. In Britain, the populist movement promoted the UK leaving the European Union, a choice with bad consequences.

In the US, this populism brought to leadership a cynical manipulator, Donald Trump, who devastated every guard rail of good governance during his four years. He also almost succeeded in derailing US leadership worldwide.

This country, says Hill, is only as good as the quality of its population: general health and well-being and educational attainment. "People, individually and collectively, form the core of America's institutions and drive innovation." Good government can lead the way to restoring who we are.

Next week: Solving Alienation

687 words

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